Ray Brassier on Nick Land

This is a brief (and quickly written) commentary on an old talk by Ray Brassier, about Nick Land, dating from 2010. The questions around speculative realism, accelerationism, and Land's current politics are all still with us today. Brassier describes Land's philosophical project, its impetus, its originality, and why it ends in an impasse that Land can only deal with by becoming a neo-reactionary.

According to Brassier (and I think this is entirely accurate), Land's starting point is the "transcendental materialism" of Deleuze and Guattari. Land "proposes to radicalise critique… by collapsing the hierarchy of the transcendental and the empirical… the first thing that needs to be destratified is the empirical/transcendental difference." Kant's critique of metaphysics is conducted precisely by means of distinguishing the transcendental from the empirical (and also the transcendental from the transcendent). Deleuze and, *a fortiriori*, Land turn this critique back upon its presuppositions, in order to affirm a radical immanence, in which "matter itself is synthetic and productive. Matter is primary process, and everything that unfolds at the level of conceptual representation is merely secondary and derivative." Deleuze already pursues this via Bergson's critique of representation and privileging of intuition. Land goes further, getting rid of intuition, and of anything else that is subjective, phenomenological, or affective. Land values intensity in itself, apart from any of these frameworks; the "subject" cannot experience intensity, because intensity destabilises and eliminates it. Brassier applauds this move, in contrast to the "flaccid inanity of contemporary Bergsonian vitalism," which Brassier clearly detests.

However, this move also gets Land into an impossible impasse; this is because

> *vitalism is hence all about having intense experiences. But Landianism can't avail itself of this register of intensification, because he's not interested in phenomenological subjectivity and he's not interested in experiences insofar as they are experiences of a subject in the Deleuzoguattarian*

> *register: an organism, with a face and a personal identity, etc. These are all the things that are supposed to require destratification.*

In other words, the project fails precisely because intensification is "not translatable into any register of affective experience or affective intensity" — in exactly the same way that it is not translatable into any register of cognition or conceptualization. Those of us working in affect theory have been claiming for quite some time that the realm of affect is presubjective, and that it includes layers of efficacy and determination that are irreducible to cognition or to concepts. (My own version of this works this out by ignoring Kant's transcendental argument in the First Critique, in favor of his aesthetics in the Third Critique). Brassier tells us that we are operating with a stacked deck, as it were; all our arguments about the failure of cognition or of concepts can be turned around to equally demonstrate the failure of "affective experience or affective intensity." From Brassier's point of view, we are all a bit "muddle-headed" (as Russell accused Whitehead of being). In Brassier's account, the superiority of Land is that he at least faces the deep consequences of an ethics of intensity, as Deleuze and affect theorists do not.

But the other side of this is that, according to Brassier, Land has no other basis for action besides the one that he has so rigorously destroyed. Land wants to maintain "that you can just keep on intensifying and intensifying," without end. This is impressive in that it substitutes a death drive, Thanatos, for the vitalist (Bergsonian) life drive that Brassier finds so lax and vapid. But ultimately Land's process of radicalization subverts itself: "if your schizoanalytical practice is fuelled by the need to always intensify and deterritorialize, there comes a point at which there is no agency left: you yourself have been dissolved back into the process." Inevitably "you end up engendering performative contradictions, not just theoretical ones. Contradictions at the level of concepts manifest themselves as an incapacity at the level of practice." Or, in other words, Land's philosophy "leads to a kind of practical impotence."

From this, the route to Land's current politics is easy to see. For Land, "politics must be displaced, it must be deputized, and all you can do is endorse or affirm impersonal processes which at least harbour the promise of generating or ushering in the next phase of deterritorialization." You can only be fatalistic, welcoming the processes that destroy us as agents or subjects. But *in practice*, your disavowal of any willed practice "means affirming free markets, deregulation, the capitalist desecration of traditional forms of social organization, etc.… If you have no strategy, someone with a strategy will soon commandeer your tactics." Land ends up becoming "he pawn of another kind of impersonal force… a much more cynical kind of libertarian capitalism." Celebrating capitalist deterritorialization for its own sake leads to neo-reaction, or neo-feudalism, or whatever else we want to call the emerging politics of Silicon Valley.

Trump may be losing the current election, but (as Roddey Reid suggests), a Trump 2.0 is likely to emerge in the near future, one much slicker than Trump, and even more insidious.

Brassier's own answer to this dilemma consists in his turn toward Sellars and allied philosophers; it's a sort of Kant 2.0 that rehabilitates epistemology, rationality, and scientism from Deleuzian and Landian critiques. But I am not going to go into my own critique of Brassier's position in any direct way here; rather, I want to suggest the possibility of a third position, distinct from either Brassier or Land, but nonetheless subsisting within the (anti-vitalist) terrain that Brassier depicts.

In short: Brassier warns us that "once thinking itself becomes subordinated to the imperative to intensify and destratify," — and thereby rejects representation and epistemological issues– then "it's clear that there must be a limitrophic point of absolute deterritorialization towards which the process of affirmation or acceleration tends." But why should thought be governed by "the imperative to intensify and destratify," any more than by the more traditional philosophic imperative of self-reflexive epistemological and representational critique? I am inclined to think that these are two sides of the same coin. Why should we do either?

My own response here is an aesthetic one. I am inclined to think (as I already argue in my book *Discognition*) that — far from being a discrediting flaw — **performative contradiction** is actually a sign that something is going right. Or — to put it a bit less categorically — arguments that end in performative contradiction are of course not necessarily right; but any line of approach that **is** right must necessarily lead to some sort of performative contradiction. This is because of the necessary inadequacy of cognitive categories to grasp and determine the Real. It's a lesson we ultimately get from Kant, in spite of himself, and that becomes more overt in post-Kantians like Derrida (I know he usually isn't regarded this way, but he should be), and in today's speculative realism. This is where we get the philosophical destratification of the transcendental-empirical binary. All of our transcendental *a prioris* (and we cannot ever dispense with them) turn out to be empirical and contingent in the last analysis. The very act of making a categorical assertion involves me in a performative contradiction; yet we cannot do without such categorical assertions. You can well say, from the point of view of epistemology, that this situation "leads to a kind of practical impotence," or to an endless process of deconstruction. But *performative contradiction* is an *aesthetic* condition, not an epistemological one. Art exists because the most important things in life are epistemologically intractable. Epistemology (the First Critique) and ethics (the Second Critique) are incomplete, and indeed they can only avoid collapse, through the intervention of aesthetics (the Third Critique).

I think that (as I argued in a different way in my little book on accelerationism) any such neo-aestheticism also implies a different theory of desire from the one we take for granted. Affirmationist and vitalist theory, and the radical negation of these that we find in its most "virulent" form in Land, and in a much more sophisticated form in Brassier, are united in that they both assume the infinitude of desire, and hence the inevitable discontinuity between desire (or desiring production) and its actual effects or consequences. Such is also the presupposition of the 19th and 20th century sublime, of psychoanalytic theories of desire, and of the simple consumerism which is our most elaborated form of desire today. Against this widely-shared idea of desire's infinitude, what I am calling neo-aestheticism understands desire as being finite, multiple, and combinatorial. Such an approach to desire is expressed most fully perhaps, in Charles Fourier's utopian visions (which are simultaneously a parody of bourgeois-capitalist forms of subjectivity, and their antidote), as well as in the notions of self-fashioning that we see, perhaps, in Oscar Wilde and Andy Warhol. Aesthetic self-fashioning does not start in any thing subjective or agential; instead, it ends in them (and of course it only ends in this way provisionally, because as finite and combinatorial it always runs out at some point, and hence needs to be practised again. This incompletion is what is often misunderstood as the infinitude of desire; but it involves repeated small satisfactions, rather than some general existential dissatisfaction).